

Epiphany VI A

Matthew 5:21-37 The Law and the Foundation of Christian Life

There are several approaches to this gospel and its difficult material. So first, I'm taking refuge in historical trivia. What part of this morning's worship originated outside the Christian religion?

Congregation: The Psalm?

You're right, but that's not what I was thinking about. I was thinking about the first hymn we sang. (*Hymnal 1982*, #372, Praise to the living God!)

Congregation: Right. It came from the Jewish tradition.

Not only from the Jewish tradition, but from the Jewish tradition after Christianity had separated from it. It might be legitimate to say that the Psalms are as Christian as they are Jewish because they originated before the two traditions split. Both Christians and Jews retained them when the traditions split. This hymn is from the Medieval Jewish liturgy – revised a bit, but still a product of another religion, separate from Christianity. The hymn originated outside the developing Christian tradition and has been grafted into it. To find it in an Episcopalian hymnal is a statement of hope.

Congregation: I think the original had 13 verses.

Well, our adaptations have to be tempered by practicality and, in this case, by current belief that if a service lasts more than an hour and a quarter the congregation turns into pumpkins. May we always recognize excellence from outside ourselves and be free to borrow it. Before we look at today's Gospel this spirit of open hearted acceptance needs to be kept in mind.

This gospel expands on Jesus's earlier statement in the Sermon on the Mount that he has come to fulfil the law, not to change or delete it. "Not an iota will pass away." This material illustrates that more general principle.

We'll focus on the first illustration in the sequence, the one using murder. This may not be as pastorally applicable as some of the later illustrations, but before we can be turned loose with them we need to learn the spirit in which the mass of material ought to be approached. The first oddity is that Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said . . ." He might also have said, "You have read . . ." Despite popular appeal to the myth of a happy and ignorant Palestinian peasantry, first century Judaism had an educational system the goal of which was to make the ability to read scripture available to all free born Jewish adult males. That means their system may not have been much worse than ours.

There is even some evidence that a few of the rabbis taught Torah to women – the evidence being the complaints of other rabbis sniping at them for doing so. It would be unusual for their to be so much griping if the practice were wholly mythical. We even have a few statements on the other side, stories of rabbi's wives whose knowledge of Torah surpassed that of their husbands. (See Religion and Sexism, "Images of Women in the Talmud," Judith Hauptmann)

Back to our core subject. The Ten Commandments do make the statement, 'You shall do no

murder.’ Ever since people have been discussing its limitations. Do no murder – except during war in the service of the state. Do no murder – except in self defense. Do no murder – except when defending those for whom you are responsible. Do no murder – except when the law tells you capital punishment is justified. And exceptions multiply. And are we to count the deaths to which we contribute by not protesting certain policies of our state and nation? What of those situations in which we move people towards death through our harshness, incomprehension, greed, carelessness or unthinking attachment to tradition? An apparently simple moral injunction turns out to have immense complexity.

Jesus adds to the commandment, something not in the original, that whoever murders shall be liable to judgement. Old Testament laws are divided, depending on structure, into two categories: laws which have results attached and laws which do not. The technical names are casuistic for laws consisting of a crime and a penalty or result and apodictic for laws which have no additional material beyond the law itself. The second half of the Ten commandments are examples of apodictic law. They are phrased absolutely and not as if-then statements.

In today’s gospel, Jesus takes an apodictic law-statement from the Ten Commandments and changes it to a casuistic one. IF you commit murder, THEN you are liable to judgement. He has changed the form of the law.

Congregation: It seems contradictory to have a law without a penalty which is expressed absolutely. What if one of these is broken? How was this viewed?

You have picked up the key point. First, there are plenty of rules in the Old Testament dealing with the penalty for different sorts of murder. It’s not that the mass of Old Testament law lacks teeth in this regard, it’s that this specific statement is distinct. (Numbers 35:16-34, for instance gives a rather complicated set of rules for distinguishing murder from accidental death.)

It’s precisely in a lack of penalty from a human point of view that the character of these apodictic (absolute) laws begins to emerge. They have to do primarily with one’s relation with God and not the legal processes of the human community. Once you start talking about a relation with God all sorts of contradictory things begin to emerge. The contradictory thing we’re concerned with today is the concept of judgment and mercy. Christianity and Judaism both make absolute claims about the mercy of God. The New Testament clearly makes the statement that there is no end to God’s mercy and God will not cease being merciful, no matter what human beings would like him to do, until there is no possibility that that mercy will have any effect. This position emerges in The Revelation to John, in which there is no account of human beings being tossed into the lake of fire, but only those evil entities which attempt to seduce human beings away from God. Hell, in the eyes of the author of Revelation, is not for people, but for that which makes possible human separation from God. That is an important distinction frequently missed by readers.

If one has to focus on what causes us to need mercy, the ethical enterprise becomes much more challenging than a mere condemnation for deeds would make it. What causes us to need mercy? Crafting an understanding of and response to that is far more fundamental to the living of the Christian life than determining who’s right and who’s wrong and why. The utter absoluteness of apodictic law points us toward our need for mercy. Enough on that.

To get back to the statement of Jesus: If you commit murder you are liable to judgment. He continues: if you are angry with a brother or sister you are liable to judgement. Then he goes on to say if you insult a brother or sister you are liable to the council. The mesh of the moral net is becoming finer and finer.

There's a point here, peripheral perhaps, but interesting and quite attractive to a mind like mine. "You will be liable to the council." The Greek word here is *συνηδριον*. For years, it was interpreted as the Great Sanhedrin, which met in Jerusalem and determined the affairs of the whole Jewish community. But a closer look at the passage and other contemporary sources indicates this is the local Sanhedrin which existed in the first century in both Christian and Jewish communities. It was the council of judgment of the local church or synagogue. The contrast is between judgment in the local community and judgment by God.

Then Jesus continues, "and if you say, 'You fool.' you will be liable to the hell of fire." This is peculiar stuff, because as the crime gets less and less severe the punishment becomes greater and greater. The word translated as "fool" is the term "*ρακα*," a Greek rendition of a term of Hebrew origin. It's a relatively mild term of abuse, which probably wouldn't be used over the dinner table, but which didn't involve the rabbinic penalties for swearing. In Hebrew law it was not an actionable term. If you called your neighbor a slave, a *δουλος*, that was actionable, but a *ρακα* (fool or empty head) was not.

So what's the point to this curious strengthening of penalty contrasted with the decreasing severity of offense? Jesus then goes on to say, "When you are offering your gift at the altar and you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift and go. Be reconciled." The affairs of the human community come before the formal worship of God. The gospel passage illuminating the meaning here is one about the disciples going through a grain field on the Sabbath and rubbing the kernels together to get rid of the chaff. The Pharisees conveniently pop up, presumably from where they'd been hiding in the grain, and start questioning the disciples. "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath."

Historically, this statement about offering gifts at the altar places the passage early in the history of the Christian community. The Christians are still understanding themselves as Jews who offer sacrifice at the temple. This is about as early a passage as you can find in the New Testament. A number of very skeptical scholars support the idea that several of these antitheses go back to Jesus. That's historically interesting, if not terribly important to the interpretation of the passage.

Now, if you are angry with your brother you are liable to local judgment. If you insult a brother, you're liable to the public council. If you say, "You fool" you're liable to divine condemnation. Generally speaking, when you find a passage of exaggeration, that means there is a point being made by means of exaggeration and one is not to take specific turns of phrase with utmost seriousness. Seek the direction and general import of such passages. If you interpret them literally, you are a *ρακα*.

The point is that we ordinarily interpret these commandments in terms of what we must not take. We must not deprive a person of life. We must not deprive a person of property and in the later Jewish and Christian interpretations we must not deprive a person of basic human relationships. Jesus is saying that if we understand our moral life as not depriving we have only taken the first step. As Paul says in today's epistle, we are still in the flesh and babes in the faith. What Jesus is getting at is

that people have a right to have their community support the gift of life God has given them. So if we are angry, if we turn the anger into insult, then although it isn't a murder, it's an assault on another person's capacity to live. And that's forbidden. If the law is to be fulfilled there must be no assault on another's capacity to live. Their capacity to live must be supported, not denied.

This is fundamental to Christian ethics. A life cannot be formed from a series of negations. What we are forbidden to do may be significant in preventing the formation of an unchristian life, but that can only be the horizon, the beginning. The challenge is to form a life which is, in its relationship to all other elements of the creation and, finally, in its relating to God, a life which extols, honors, supports the life which God has given away to everyone and everything.

This principle applies not only to life, but to being itself. As long as there is being in that which is not Jon Goman, Jon Goman's ethical responsibility consists of supporting and seeking to honor, extol and increase that being which is not me. This is foundational Christian ethics.

It is also what makes the Christian ethical scheme impossible to live up to, if you understand being an ethical person as doing the right thing. I would understand being ethical as seeking the right goal, as hoping a hope worthy of our Lord. God can take care of my falling short in doing. It may be harder to deal with not caring or not hoping.

In his inverted progression of offense and punishment this is what Jesus is moving toward. By way of contrast, return to Deuteronomy, an example of a failed theology. Do good and God will take care of you. The great crises of faith in Old Testament history came about when the Hebrews discovered that it didn't work. That's what Job is about. That's what Ecclesiastes is about. I was the wise man and pursued the wisdom of God and, behold, it is all bubbles – one possible translation for the word usually rendered as “vanity.”

Don't think I'm criticizing the quality of thought in Deuteronomy. Somebody had to move to thinking that moral principle is key in relation to God. Why? Because we know that at the same time Deuteronomy was being written, in many other ancient near Eastern religions divinity and morality had nothing to do with each other. The author (authors?) of Deuteronomy were like Newton and Freud, and other people who first get great ideas. The form in which a truly great idea first shows up may very well need all sorts of later revision. To dismiss the basic idea because it needs to be revised is cutting off one's tongue to spite one's face.

So Deuteronomy needs to be honored because it proposes that there is a relation between God and the moral life. And that's an idea of genius, a religious genius. But the idea needs to be worked out – and its exploration, its application gets worked out in Job, in Ecclesiastes, and, finally in the New Testament and we have the statements of Jesus, not intended to be understood as behavioral standards, but as statements of hope for our humanity. This creates tension. Yes, we are supposed to live out of that hope and that means taking the statements of Jesus seriously. The demand remains absolute. Yet God's mercy remains absolute at the same time.

This makes the Christian life uncomfortable. We're always trying to escape either into a moralism in which our doing is the key reality or into a system in which there is a lack of expectation (sometimes disguised) placed upon us. Example would be the theological stance of predestination and the secular stance of materialistic determinism. But for the Christian both expectation and mercy are absolute.

That's difficult and confusing.

Comment: As a practical comment Jesus is putting his finger here on the corrosive impact of hurtful speech. We can't forget that in marriages, in personal relationships.

What you point to is an example of murder by indirection. It is a lack of support for the flowering of life.

Comment: So you murder the spirit?

It depends on how you understand spirit. I'd say that the corrosive effect of unloving speech also causes the physical lives of people to decay. If you look at people verbally abused, you frequently see compromised physical health. When we make this distinction between physical and spiritual we need to be somewhat careful. The bands uniting physical and spiritual are pretty tight. The destruction of physical health by means of speech is very real. The support of physical health by means of speech is just as real. Good counseling is a true medical practice as it gives bodily healing also.

Well, that's all I have to say about that. My task was to give an example of the spirit in which all the rest of this part of the Sermon on the Mount needs to be understood. In my judgment it is utterly destructive to take the material about marriage contained in this passage and treat it legalistically. We don't do that with the material on murder. There is an ethical inconsistency if we treat the marriage material differently than the murder material. The point is what Christians seek, what we hope for, not the condemnation of historical failures to live up to that hope.

The question is, how do we relate to each other and God so that the absoluteness of ethical demand is acknowledged and the presence of an equal or greater mercy is also recognized at the same time. That's the challenge.

So acknowledge the divine expectation. Seek to shape your lives by it. But always, always, always remember the equal mercy. To accept, for oneself and on behalf of others, the mercy of God is as important as seeking to do right.

That's enough about that. Please stand for the creed.